

[By Daniel Barlow, Rutland Herald](#)

U.S. Rep. Peter Welch said Tuesday that he is disappointed in the Senate's version of health care reform, but will keep fighting for a public health insurance option as the two bills are reconciled.

The House passed its health care reform bill back in October, a piece of legislation that would create a government-run health insurance program competing directly in the market for customers against the health insurance companies.

Senators, meanwhile, are scheduled to pass their own version of the bill on Christmas Eve that does not include a public option, but still mandates that all United States citizens have health insurance.

"The public option is one of the most vital parts of the health care bill," Welch said during a telephone interview Tuesday afternoon. "The House pushed the public option in our bill and the Senate slipped it out. We're going to fight to get it back in."

It's not clear yet what the process will be going forward if the Senate passes the bill along party lines as expected later this week. Because there are substantial differences between the two bills, lawmakers need to reconcile the legislation into a single bill, which would then be sent to President Obama for his signature.

Welch said he hopes that the differences between the two bills are worked out in conference committee – an appointed group of lawmakers from the House and Senate who would negotiate the changes that make it into the final bill.

Vermont's Democratic congressman would not say how he would vote if the Senate version of the bill arrived in the House for approval. If the bills go to conference – a decision that congressional Democratic leaders will likely make after the holiday break – the more liberal

House members will push to retain the stronger elements of that bill, Welch said.

Among the sticking points between the two bills are the lack of a public option, federal funding for abortions and how the bill would be financed. The House version of the bill raises taxes on people making more than \$500,000 a year to help fund health care reform; the Senate bill taxes insurance companies that offer so-called "Cadillac" plans.

Welch said he was "astonished" that the Senate removed a provision in their bill sponsored by Vermont Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy that would have made insurance companies adhere to antitrust laws, which the senator says allows them to engage in "price-fixing, bid-rigging, and market allocations."

"Insurance companies and baseball are the two industries exempt from antitrust laws," Welch said.

Some Democrats and many progressives have become disillusioned over the changes to the bill made in the Senate. Welch said he understands and shares those concerns, but said he is not ready yet to give up on the legislation.

"We have two more innings to go," Welch said. "Let's keep fighting to make this a better bill."

Meanwhile, Vermont's independent Sen. Bernard Sanders, who will support that chamber's bill when the vote happens later this week, is under new pressure from some Vermonters to change his vote.

John Odum, the main blogger at the liberal Green Mountain Daily Web site, announced Tuesday that he was teaming up with the national liberal blog Firedoglake to pressure Sanders to vote against what they call a "dangerous health care bill."

"Some of our strongest allies — statesmen who touted the progressive line aggressively at first

— have definitively turned their backs on us," reads the petition. "Bernie Sanders is the latest 'progressive' to fall in line as a supporter."